
Termination of an Emotionally Abusive Relationship and Women with Social Resources: An Initial Exploration of a Social Problem

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The prevalence of emotional abuse perpetuated against women with higher education, resources and support systems, is a social problem that has been overlooked in the social work literature. Little is known or documented about college educated women with social resources who experience abuse (Swift, 1997). The complexities behind the question of why some of these women stay in emotionally abusive relationships and others end them remains obscure (Burke, 2001; Crane & Constantino, 2003; Fiore-Lerner, 2000; Ladenburger, 1998) and research about women who have terminated emotionally abusive relationships is limited (Lachkar, 1998). No studies have examined the experiences of emotionally abused women who are not poor and who do decide to end abusive relationships (Weitzman, 2000).

This article is an initial exploration of a specific social problem. Social, psychodynamic, and post modern theoretical perspectives and suggested modifications to the education and practice of social work will be discussed.

Emotional Abuse

The extent of physical abuse perpetrated by partners is well documented in the United States, with 3.5 million violent crimes committed against family members and 1.7 million of those crimes committed by a spouse (Catalano, 2007). In contrast, the prevalence of emotional abuse is not tracked epidemiologically, nor at the federal, state or local levels. This lack of research on emotional abuse may be linked with the prevailing belief that emotional abuse always precedes physical abuse. Some researchers have embraced the reality that emotional abuse exists independently of physical abuse (Andersen, Boulette, & Schwartz, 1991; Herman, 1997; Kirkwood, 1993; NiCarthy, 1986; Pence & Paymar, 1993). Emotional abuse is a “stepchild” in all fields of empirical inquiry, although it is listed on the continuum of abuse in most studies.

While emotional abuse does not always indicate the occurrence of physical abuse, physical abuse is almost always accompanied by emotional abuse (Lammers, Ritchie, & Robertson, 2005). The potential for long-term health and mental health consequences of emotional abuse should be observed as closely as life-threatening violence and physical aggression, which do receive public attention because of their associated risks and potential for lethality (Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981). The negative effects of emotional abuse on victims and their children are similar to physical abuse. Victims are more likely to experience poor physical health, mental impairment, difficulty concentrating, poor work performance, a higher likelihood of substance use and an increase in suicidal ideation or attempts. Children exposed to emotional abuse may become victims of abuse as adults, experience behavior problems, and develop symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2007). Existing research suggests that emotional abuse may be the key toxic ingredient in all forms of abuse and aggression (Geffner & Rossman, 1998).

Although both the scholarly literature and the media give well-deserved attention to the harms of physical abuse, they neglect to address the psychological damage to women and the social ramifications of emotional abuse. The potentially devastating impact of a pattern of continuous and insidious emotional abuse by an intimate partner is an area of inquiry that requires further attention.

Women with Social Resources

The actual prevalence of emotional abuse and the termination of emotionally abusive relationships among educated women with resources remain obscure. Available statistics indicate that low levels of income are aligned with higher levels of partner abuse. However, certain other factors might explain this gap. Help-seeking individuals may not reflect the population of partner abuse victims as a whole (Waldrop & Resick, 2004). The low-income victim may appear on statistical reports when entering a domestic violence shelter or applying for public assistance benefits, while a victim in a higher socioeconomic strata will be unlikely to disclose her abuse to a public agency (Aardvarc, 2009).

Women with social resources may be under-represented in the social work literature regarding partner abuse because of their reluctance to seek help (Weitzman, 2000). The myth that partner abuse affects only the disenfranchised is perpetuated by the larger society and is often accepted by the victims (Weitzman). According to Lachkar (2000, p. 90), on the surface it is easy to say, "They have it all," which belittles and minimizes the experience of emotional abuse for women with resources.

Money, education, employment, family /friends, and the legal bond of marriage have been discussed as structural barriers for women that inhibit the termination of abusive relationships (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991). Shame has also been posited as a major factor in a woman's reluctance to disclose abuse, therefore forcing her to adjust her expectations and utilize internal strategies that allow her to stay (Buchbinder & Eiskovits, 2003).

Research on physical and emotional abuse emphasizes that a lack of available resources (money, education and social support systems) explains why women remain with their abusive partners. Abused women are described by some researchers as helpless and trapped in relationships due to economic factors (Gelles, 1974; Strube & Barbour, 1984), while others posit that women who are sufficiently motivated to leave do so, despite their lack of economic resources (Rounsaville, 1978). The implication is that women with a variety of personal and structural resources feel more control over their situations and are more successful at terminating abusive relationships (Choice & Lamke, 1997). Strube and Barbour (1984) and Rusbult and Martz (1995) noted a positive association between a woman's economic independence and the termination of an abusive relationship among women of a lower socioeconomic status while available data on educated women with resources and empowerment is not available.

The limited research indicates that women with resources also struggle to terminate abusive relationships. However, it is unclear what constitutes the struggle and if the factors are the same, overlapping, or different from the factors involved in terminating an emotionally abusive relationship for women who are less advantaged.

Theoretical Background

Social, psychodynamic, and post- modern theories provide insight into the complex issues regarding the termination of an emotionally abusive relationship for women viewed as non-marginalized. Social theories attempt to make sense of how individuals' attitudes and

behaviors develop based upon the impact of cultural and social norms. Feminist, social role and investment theories inform our understanding of the complex issues involved in a woman's perception and expectations of herself within society. Psychodynamic theories focus on the psychological aspects of an individual's early childhood development and the impact of early childhood experiences on personality construction and adult emotional functioning. Classic and contemporary psychodynamic theories, including object relations theory, attachment theory, and relational-cultural theory are informative to the study of emotionally abused women with social resources who terminate their relationships.

Post modernism represents an historical shift in theoretical perspectives and views human identity as deeply connected to culture without an absolute way of representing history (Danto, 2008; Ferguson & Wicke, 1994). Influences of post modernist thought on feminist ideology, intersectionality theory and theories of agency are especially relevant to the complexities involved in terminating emotionally abusive relationships for women with social resources.

Social, psychodynamic, and post-modernist theories are presented collectively because each perspective provides a lens with which to understand the psychological and social factors associated with emotional abuse. Due to a lack of literature about this problem, one theoretical perspective cannot capture or unearth the nuances of this multi-dimensional issue. The exploration of social role and relationship identifications, feminist ideology and theories of agency in conjunction with early attachment theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the issues regarding both the endurance of and ultimately, the termination of an emotionally abusive relationship.

Importance to Social Work

The lack of examination and recognition by the social work profession of abuse among women with resources is itself a problem that requires attention. In my experience it has become apparent that the knowledge about treatment options and referral sources for emotionally abused women with resources is inadequate. Weitzman (2000) noted antagonism and opposition among social work colleagues upon discussing her work with educated women experiencing partner abuse. Women who are perceived by society as non-marginalized are overlooked as victims in need of services and may feel they have less access to help than their counterparts; exposure of partner abuse among the more socially advantaged segments of society has been viewed as controversial and threatening to the status quo (Weitzman).

Increased awareness will help to legitimize emotional abuse as a social ill and influence the availability of information about the signs, treatment, and service options for victims. The inclusion of the categories of emotional abuse to the list of domestic abuse recognized by the Violence against Women Act (Title IV Sec. 4001-40703, H.R. 3355, 3402, 1994, 2005) will validate a woman's right to seek legal recourse for emotional abuse. The commitment of social workers to represent disenfranchised populations includes all women suffering from abuse, including those with education and resources. Expanded knowledge of this issue has the potential to provide improved methods in social work education regarding the signs, symptoms, and treatment of emotional abuse, broader outreach of service provision, and enhanced practice methods.

Social work students will be better prepared for practice when course materials reflect the multi-dimensionality of emotional abuse in all its forms, such as manipulation, degradation, and control. Social workers, both in intern and professional capacities, will be better equipped to assess, treat, and/or refer victims of emotional abuse, when properly prepared. Client

evaluations and treatment plans will be more comprehensive and accurate when practitioners are guided by tools that delineate different forms of partner abuse.

Social work as a profession is more effective when women from all socioeconomic backgrounds are aware of what it has to offer. Social work agencies that either accept health insurance or provide mental health services on a fee for service basis, could distribute literature advertising their services in locations that might be accessed by women with social resources, such as their primary care physician, gynecologist, attorney's office, employee assistance program or houses of worship.

Sugg and Inui (1992) found that patients of higher socioeconomic status were asked about abuse much less frequently, thereby perpetuating the myth that intimate partner abuse occurs only among individuals suffering from poverty. Therapeutic interventions must be aligned with the client's perspective about the abusive relationship (Crane & Constantino, 2003). The knowledge practitioners share with each other and with the public about the range of partner abuse among varied populations is vital for policy development in the field. (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

Conclusion

Partner abuse is overly represented in the social work literature as a problem affecting minority women with little or no access to social resources. Studies have been conducted almost exclusively on working class communities and socially marginalized families, under representing the middle-class population (Stewart, 1987). The prevalence of emotional abuse experienced by women with higher education, resources and support systems, is overlooked and the literature indicates a societal belief that educated women with careers or access to social resources have the ability to extricate themselves from abusive relationships. The social work profession will benefit from further inquiry about the impact and complexities of terminating emotionally abusive relationships, and acknowledging that partner abuse exists among all socioeconomic populations.

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